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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 SANAA 001771

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [YM](#) [COUNTER](#) [TERRORISM](#) [DOMESTIC](#) [POLITICS](#)

SUBJECT: SA'DA FIGHTING: UPDATE AND IMPLICATIONS

REF: A. SANAA 1686

[1](#)B. SANAA 1663

Classified By: CDA NABEEL KHOURY FOR REASONS 1.5 (A AND D).

Summary and Comment:

[1](#)1. (S) After an estimated 400-500 deaths, a large number of injured on both sides and roughly 400 al-Houthy supporters detained, the fighting in the Sa'da region in the north of Yemen remains inconclusive. A cease-fire was recently announced by the Government but non-official accounts indicate that the fight continues. Rumors abound concerning the role of the tribes in the region, the fate of al-Houthy himself and the possible spread of the fighting beyond the Merran mountains into the urban areas of Sa'da. The ROYG has accused al-Houthy of having procured foreign connections and funding and would have us believe that this is, therefore, a fight against international terrorism. Post cannot verify such claims nor justify such a conclusion. Nevertheless, the conflict has developed into a major test of the state's ability to exert its authority and crush a rebellion that, in the eyes of many here, has already caused rifts that could lead to serious sectarian and/or tribal strife. (Comment: It is not in the U.S. interest to allow President Saleh to be personally humiliated in this fight nor the state institutions to become weakened as a result of it). End summary and comment.

Origins of the conflict:

[1](#)2. (S) Per ref(a), al-Houthy's provocations date back two years when his lectures/sermons turned more radical and lambasted the government for its "encouragement of foreign invaders." al-Houthy's sloganeering (death to America, death to Israel) led to demonstrations against the U.S. which resulted in the arrest of some of his supporters. Having first supported al-Houthy's break with the Islamist al-Haq party and the formation of a new "Shabab al-Mou'mineen" (The Believing Youth) group, our contacts and interlocutors differ on what led to President Saleh's about-face with al-Houthy. Many refer to a presidential visit last year to Sa'da while enroute to performing "Omra" in Mekka. It is said that Saleh was practically turned away from speaking at a local mosque with anti-American and anti-Israeli chants. Other stories speak of a confrontation between al-Houthy and the Governor of Sa'da in which Saleh took the side of his Governor and ordered the arrest of al-Houthy. Some say al-Houthy was simply "invited" to appear before Saleh, an offer which he turned down, precipitating a confrontation with the soldiers who were dispatched to escort al-Houthy to Sanaa.

al-Houthy's movement: Sectarian or ideological in nature?

[1](#)3. (S) The ROYG would have us believe that they are engaged in a fight against international terrorism because of al-Houthy's purported regional connections. Saleh has personally described al-Houthy's "rebellion" as inspired by Iran. His ministers have endorsed this view but have also pointed at times to possible support from Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Government has recently issued a statement denying any involvement and supporting Saleh in his quest to restore law and order in Sa'da. Iran has also distanced itself from al-Houthy (FM Qirbi received a phone call to that effect from the Iranian ambassador to Sanaa while he was at lunch with Ambassador and DCM last week. The Iranian ambassador promised a statement but we have not yet seen it). Regardless of claims and counter claims, we have not seen any intelligence confirming al-Houthy's alleged links to international terrorism or to official Iranian support. Further, conversations with the moderate Islamist party, al-Islah, have revealed a very strong distaste by this Sunni movement to what they describe as a Shia (Zaidi) rebellion. The socialist YSP, although critical of Saleh for rushing into an armed conflict, have also described al-Houthy's movement as sectarian and a potential threat to national unity. Saleh and his ministers, in fact, unselfconsciously refer to al-Houthy supporters as Shia, indicating that they think of them as a religious rather than a political faction. Several independent interlocutors have referred to the Zaidis as

ardent believers, still, in the return of the Imamate under Zaidi control and on that bases reject the legitimacy of the republic.

What's at stake for the ROYG?

14. (S) Regardless of the origins of this fight and of any possible outside connections for al-Houthy, the confrontation between him and President Saleh has taken on a dynamic of its own with serious consequences for both sides. Several hundred al-Houthy followers are currently in Sanaa jails. They are reportedly being "interviewed" by Supreme Court Judge al-Hitar who has thus far failed to persuade any of them to denounce al-Houthy. Should al-Houthy fall into government hands, the Government intends to charge him with serious crimes against the state, but promises a fair trial. This, of course, provided he survives his capture. Despite continued talk of mediation efforts, for Saleh, the al-Houthy rebellion has lasted too long and cost too many lives to allow for a negotiated settlement. The challenge is not only personal for the president, it has also put the prestige of the state on the line. If al-Houthy, reportedly with some tribal support (jealous over their turf being trampled by the government), can evade the arm of the law with impunity it would set a very bad precedent for other Zaidis and possibly tribes and political factions around the country who may also entertain questions regarding the legitimacy of the republic. Religious strife between Sunnis and Zaidis may also, according to some local observers, be a dangerous outcome of a failure to suppress al-Houthy's movement. Such scenarios cannot but ring alarm bells for the Saleh regime at a time when he is desperately trying to promote Yemen as a partner to the U.S. and the European countries in development and democratization projects in the Middle East. Saleh has personally asked us, the French and the Saudis for public statements of support for his government in its confrontation with al-Houthy.

What's at stake for the USG?

15. (S) Pending further information, post cannot confirm or rule out any links of al-Houthy to international terrorism. That said, al-Houthy's rhetoric and behavior are dangerous for internal stability and for U.S. interests in Yemen and the region. Antipathy for the U.S. is clearly very strongly felt by al-Houthy and his followers. Further, a failure to bring the al-Houthy movement under control would risk having the Sa'da region wriggle out of the central government's control and would encourage tribes in the region to assert their own rejection of the state's writ in their areas. the Saleh government, for all its shortcomings, has committed itself to fighting regional terrorism and to implementing political and economic reforms in cooperation with the USG and the EU. A discredited and weakened regime would not be able to follow through on such commitments.

Policy Comment:

16. (S) Whereas U.S. assistance to Yemen on the social, political and economic fronts has been substantial and unabashed, assistance on the military front (particularly as related the recent Sa'da fighting) has been more low key and low-profile. This, in our view, is as it should be, given the balancing act Saleh has to perform in cementing his ties with the west while retaining the posture of the leader of an independent and sovereign country. Our support also needs to drive a balance between supporting stability and security without encouraging the rash use of force while disregarding human rights and the rule of law.

End comment.

KHOURY